Beyond the Gap Fill: Dynamic Activities for Song in the EFL Classroom

any teachers like to use music and song in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. Good motivational tools, music and song are fun and relaxing, and they provide a class with variety and a break from textbook study. Particularly with younger learners, songs and chants are often used to teach new vocabulary in a nonthreatening, naturalistic manner. Older students and advanced learners can analyze lyrics and explore a songwriter's language choice and usage, along with cultural elements such as social values, human relationships, spirituality, patriotism, and dissent (Murphey 1992). Despite the rich potential of songs as authentic and stimulating texts, when it comes to designing a listening activity for a song, teachers tend to rely upon the Gap Fill as the sole activity: "Listen and fill in the blanks ... listen again ... check and move on to the next activity" is almost a mantra. Yet songs can be utilized in more variable and stimulating

ways to challenge students to learn and think about language, and songs can provide opportunities for integrated skills practice as well as cultural and intercultural analysis.

This article will describe how to make the most of the natural advantages that songs bring, extending and transcending the basic techniques to entice students and make them aware of and connected with the language as they engage in the inherently captivating activity that is song.

A basic framework for incorporating songs

The following activities for exploiting songs can certainly be employed in isolation; however, getting the most from songs as an authentic resource requires situating the listening activities within a coherent framework.

Following is a simple three-stage framework recommended for general listening activities, which is easily and effectively transferred to songs:

1. *The pre-listening stage*: Students engage in activities that activate

schema or background knowledge of a song's main theme. This step may consist of several warm-up questions to be discussed with a partner, the introduction of some key vocabulary items, or prediction activities.

- 2. The while listening stage: Students listen to the song and complete an assigned
- 3. The post-listening stage: Students analyze new vocabulary; they also discuss lyrics and the songwriter's intended meaning. They may engage in speaking or writing activities.

This article focuses upon activities for the while listening stage. Similar activities have been in circulation in EFL classrooms for a number of years, yet they remain new to teachers participating in workshops and training programs that I have facilitated. (Note: Although I use contemporary pop songs in my classes, for copyright reasons the examples in this article employ traditional songs in the public domain. For many of the songs mentioned in this article, you can find and download complete sets of lyrics and MP3s for free at the American English website: http://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/sing-outloud-traditional-songs.)

The Double Gap Fill — Reenergizing the old standby

The classic EFL song activity remains the Gap Fill, where the teacher whites out a key word every line or so, the students listen once or twice and fill in the blanks with the words they hear, and answers are right or wrong. With lyrics readily available online, the activity is quick and easy to make and usually looks something like the exercise in Figure 1.

Although the activity helps students identify words and improve their micro-listening skills, it does not necessarily require them to think about language before they listen, and, as a result, students often transcribe incorrect forms of words—for example, a noun instead of an adjective—by trusting their ears more than their lexical or grammatical knowledge. At times learners may catch only part of a word because of pronunciation issues: elision, assimilation, interference, or chunking of formulaic phrases. While students may recognize

the word error if given a number of sentences to correct without the context of a listening activity, when listening is the prime focus, transcribing a singer's pronunciation appears to take precedence over whether the word makes sense in the gap or not.

The modification: Double Gap Fill

I designed the Double Gap Fill to help students think about language before they listen. By thinking about the form the word must take before they hear it, students improve their chances of success and activate their underlying linguistic knowledge.

Procedures:

Step 1: Pre-listening. Students are put into pairs for a short discussion and to brainstorm vocabulary and expressions that are relevant to the topic of the song. For "Home on the Range," students are asked to brainstorm what they know about the American Old West—cowboys, horses, buffaloes, etc.—and what they imagine it would be like to live there. What is the weather like? Is it quiet and peaceful or fun and energetic? Hopefully this will generate vocabulary that they will be able to employ in Step 2.

Step 2: Pre-listening. Guided by "hint words" in parentheses, as in Figure 2, students fill in the blanks and complete the song with their predictions of what the missing words will be. (G)______ is for the word they *guess* will fill the blank; (A)______ is for the actual word or *answer* they hear when the song is played.

The teacher may elicit word guesses before the song is played, and students may vote on the more interesting choices. As students read out the lyrics when doing the activity or giving an answer, their ears get a "first listen" to

Instructions: Listen and fill in each blank with the missing word.			
Oh, give me a home, where the buffalo,			
where the deer and the play,			
where is heard,			
a discouraging,			
and the skies are not all day.			

Figure 1. Gap Fill worksheet for "Home on the Range"

completes the sentence, using the words in parentheses as hints. Then listen to the song and write the correct word in the (A) answer blank.

Oh, give me a home, where the buffalo (walk around)

(G) ______ (A) ______,

where the deer and the (animal with horns)

(G) _____ (A) _____ play,

where (not often) (G) _____ (A) _____ is heard,

a discouraging (something you put in sentences)

(G) _____ (A) _____,

and the skies are not (weather) (G) ______

(A) _____ all day.

Instructions: Fill in each (G) guess blank with a word you think

Figure 2. Double Gap Fill worksheet for "Home on the Range"

the words surrounding the blanks, improving their chances of success. (Answers are *roam*, *antelope*, *seldom*, *word*, and *cloudy*.)

Seven dynamic song activities

Activities 1–3 and 5–6 below were modified and expanded upon from suggestions in *Songs in Action* (Griffee 1992), an excellent resource that is, sadly, now out of print. There are a few variations of Activity 4 on the Internet, but I was unable to find the original source to credit here. The activities serve a variety of purposes: to introduce or reinforce vocabulary knowledge, to provide practice using prediction skills, to develop awareness of coherence, and to improve storytelling ability.

Activity 1: Song Pictures

At first glance, this activity may seem appropriate only for children. Song Pictures, however, is an effective way of drawing students' attention to the emphasis on content words (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives) over function words (e.g., pronouns, determiners, prepositions) in English prosody (stress patterns). The activity can thus also serve as an effective and lighthearted warm-up for teachers who wish to develop their students' note-taking skills prior to (or during) their commencement of academic studies in English. Simpler songs can be used with low-level students, while more complex songs can be employed with high-beginner and intermediate students. Songs with repetitive lyrics work well, as students are able to hear the

words more than once. The activity also assists vocabulary retention: linking pictures to words helps students remember them, especially if the students are smiling and laughing over their partners' drawings.

Level: Low to Intermediate

Materials: Pencils (or pens or crayons) and paper

Warm-up: Have students discuss the song topic or brainstorm words they may hear that are related to the title. For "This Old Man," the teacher could write the numbers 1 through 10 on the board, put students in pairs, and ask them to think of words that rhyme with each number.

Procedure: Distribute the pencils and sheets of paper and tell students they are going to listen to a song and draw pictures. Tell them that as they listen, they are to draw the things or actions—nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives—they hear mentioned in the song. For example, students may draw pictures of a man, thumb, dog, bone, shoe, rolling, home, hive, or sticks.

Post-listening: After the song has been played two or three times, students exchange papers and try to identify what their partner has drawn.

Extension: Go over the vocabulary from the song and have students draw a few more items so that each paper has at least 10 to 12 song-word pictures on it. Have students put their names on the sheets; then collect them for use at a later date. A few weeks later, as a warm-up, give students their sheets back, have them exchange with a partner, play the song, and have students listen and number the pictures in the order that they hear them. Play the song two or three times if necessary. Once they have finished, students check their work with their partner. Finally, check answers with the whole class.

Activity 2: Re-order It

As with Song Pictures, this activity can be used to direct students' attention to the prosody features of English that are essential for developing confidence in *gist listening*—catching the main ideas and key words without necessarily comprehending detail or becoming distracted by function words. For

lower-level students, this activity may also be used for simple vocabulary development.

Level: Low to Intermediate

Preparation: Select 8 to 14 words from the selected song. These may be words students already know or new words the teacher introduces and explains before beginning the activity. Arrange the words in a grid, alphabetically, as on the worksheet in Figure 3.

Procedure: Before students listen to the song, say the words out loud and have the students repeat them. This step prepares their ears for picking out the words in the song. Then play the song. Students number the words in the order in which they hear them. After the first listening, students compare with a partner; then the song is played again so that they may check their answers. You can then elicit the order from the class and provide the final answer.

Tip: For lower-level students, you may play the song once before the students do the activity.

Variation: Instead of eliciting the order after the second listening, distribute a Gap Fill where the words you have chosen have been removed. Have students work in pairs or groups to fill in the blanks. If they have numbered the words correctly, the activity will be fairly easy; if they have not caught all the words, then students can determine where a word best fits.

(Answers: banjo = 7, captain = 5, early = 4, kitchen = 6, railroad = 1, time = 2, whistle = 3)

Activity 3: Matching Meanings

This activity is used to both review and extend vocabulary, depending on the song or text selected. Additionally, the activity encourages students to actively engage with English—English learner dictionary definitions for guessing words—a useful scaffolding technique for learners who may be over-reliant on translating unknown vocabulary. Finally, Matching Meanings can be used as an introduction to circumlocution strategies (e.g., corkscrew = "the tool you use to open a bottle of wine"), an imperative for learners preparing for either writing or speaking exams, as well as an essential survival English strategy in everyday life.

Level: High Beginner to Advanced

Preparation: From the lyrics, select the vocabulary (8 to 15 words) you want to test or reinforce and write out definitions in the order the words are heard in the song. Note that the definitions must be written in the correct order; otherwise, the activity is substantially more difficult. I find that the template in Figure 4 works well.

Procedure: Divide the class into pairs or teams. Hand out the sheet with the definitions, or write the chart on the board. Have students guess each word from the definition and write their answers in the Guess column. Elicit guesses from the class and write them on the board. Play the song and have students write down the correct words in the Actual Word column as they hear them. Have students check with their partner or group. Play the song again. Distribute the lyrics and ask students to find any words they did not catch. Elicit answers. (Answers are *snow, slow, thief, rob, hug,* and *stars.*)

Instructions: Number the words in the order you hear them.				
Word	1st Listening	2nd Listening	Answer	
banjo				
captain				
early				
kitchen				
railroad				
time				
whistle				

Figure 3. Re-order It worksheet for "I've Been Working on the Railroad"

Instructions: Read the definitions and try to guess each word. Then listen to the song and write down the actual word used by the songwriter.

	Guess Definition		Actual Word
1		frozen water from the sky	
2		opposite of fast	
3		a person who steals	
4		steal	
5		put your arms around someone	
6		lights in the sky at night	

Figure 4. Matching Meanings worksheet for "On Top of Old Smokey"

Activity 4: Changing the Text

This activity can be adapted to emphasize various aspects of language awareness or specific skills. Grammar can be emphasized by changing parts of speech (e.g., from "I have seen" to the incorrect "I have saw") or by eliminating articles, prepositions, etc. Likewise, both coherence and pronunciation awareness can be facilitated by changing content words (e.g., day/way).

Level: Low Intermediate to Intermediate

Preparation: Prepare a handout of the song lyrics where key words have been changed to similar-sounding words, as in Figure 5. Double space the lyrics so that students have room to write above each line.

Warm-up: Start by giving students the song

Instructions: Read the lyrics. One word in each line (except the first two lines of the chorus) is incorrect. Underline the words you think are wrong. Then listen and write down the correct words.

In a tavern, in a canyon,

Excavating for a wine,

Lived a miner twenty-niner,

And his mother Clementine.

Chorus: Oh, my darlin', Oh my darlin',

Oh my darlin' Clementine.

You are cost and gone forever,

Figure 5. Changing the Text worksheet for "Clementine"

Helpful sorry Clementine.

title and in pairs have them guess what the song is about. Clementine is a woman's name. The singer is a man. What kind of song do you think this is? Why is the singer singing to her? Establishing context before students

listen to the song makes it easier for them to guess which words have been changed and what the correct words might be.

Procedure: Once you have established context, put students in pairs and give them a handout of the lyrics (see Figure 5). Tell students that one word in each line is incorrect; it has been replaced with a word that rhymes with or sounds similar to the correct word. Have students look at an example: "Excavating for a wine." Then ask them to look at the key words: excavating and wine. Do these words go together? Excavating means "digging." The singer is a miner; where do miners work? Once wine/mine is elicited, ask students to read the remaining lyrics and underline the words they think are incorrect. This step allows them to go over the lyrics once with a partner and, before the listening, create a roadmap for themselves of words they will focus on and change.

Variation: To make this activity more challenging, ask students if they can guess the original word before they listen, using context or rhyming clues as a guide. (Answers are tavern/cavern; wine/mine; twenty/forty; mother/daughter; cost/lost; and helpful/dreadful.)

Activity 5: Song Strip Connections

Like Changing the Text, this activity can be used to raise awareness of coherence elements. Song Strip Connections is also useful (depending on the song or text used) for attending to complex sentence structures such as conditionals and relative clauses.

Level: Low Intermediate to Advanced

Materials: Paper or pens of two different colors or a highlighter

Preparation: Select a song and divide each line into two parts or clauses, as in Figure 6. Make cards using colored paper: the first half of each line will be on one type of colored

From this valley they say you are going,	I will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile
For they say you are taking the sunshine	that brightens our pathways awhile.
I've been thinking a long time, my darlin',	of the sweet words you never would say
Now, alas, all my fond hopes must vanish	for they say you are going away.

Figure 6. Song Strip Connections for "Red River Valley"

paper (white), and the second half will be on another (blue). If you do not have colored paper, use a highlighter to mark the cards that display the first half of each line. You could also use different colored inks—red for the first half of the line, blue or black for the second half works well. If you can laminate the cards, all the better; that will save you from having to redo the work in the future.

Procedure: Have students work in small groups. Distribute the first half of the lyric cards (white) only and have students spread them out on the table. Play the song and have the students arrange the cards in a column so that the lyrics are arranged in sequential order. Play the song again so that students can check their work. Distribute the blue cards to each group and have students complete each sentence with the correct ending. Once they have constructed the song this way, play and check. Then ask them to analyze the lyrics in groups and report to the class on what they think the song is about.

Activity 6: Song Cards—Take-sort-write

Like Song Pictures and Re-Order It, this activity can be used to explicitly draw attention to the prosody features of English (e.g., emphasis on key content words). It can also be used (depending on the song or text selected) to review or extend vocabulary.

Level: Beginner to Intermediate

Preparation: Choose 12–20 vocabulary words or phrases and write each one on an individual card. Laminate them if you can; they will last longer.

Procedure for lower-level students: Arrange students in groups of four to six and spread

the cards face-up on a table or desk before them. Have the students say the words out loud one by one. This step prepares their ears for catching the selected words during the first listening and allows them to become familiarized with the position of the words on the table. Then play the song. Students compete to grab and keep the word cards they hear. The student or team with the most cards by the end of the song wins. For a noncompetitive game, provide several sets of cards for each group.

Variation and extension for higher-level students: Listen and Sort and Gap Fill

Step 1: Make sure that you have not selected words from the chorus or refrain. Begin as above by spreading the cards on the table and having the students say the words out loud. After students have taken all the cards, give each group a blank Listen and Sort grid similar to the one shown in Figure 7, with one column for each of the song's unique stanzas. During Step 2, students will place the words they hear in the appropriate column, sorting word cards by stanza.

Step 2: Announce "First stanza"; then play the song and pause it at the end of the stanza. As students listen, they put the words they hear in the first column. Once the first stanza has been played, ask students how many cards they have, then tell them the correct number, if necessary. Then play the second stanza and repeat the procedure until the song is completed.

Step 3: After the song has been played through and students have filled in the Listen and Sort grid, have students complete a Gap Fill like the one in Figure 8, using the grid as a guide. When the groups have finished, play the song so they can check their answers.

1st Stanza	2nd Stanza	3rd Stanza	4th Stanza	5th Stanza
Alabama	rained			
banjo	weather			
Louisiana	froze			
love	cry			

Figure 7. Listen and Sort grid for "Oh! Susanna"

Instructions: Fill in the blanks with the words from the grid.

Stanza 1

I come from _____
With a _____ on my knee
I'm going to _____
My true _____ for to see.

Stanza 2

It _____ all night the day I left
The _____ it was dry
The sun so hot, I _____ to death
Susanna, don't you _____.

Figure 8. Gap Fill worksheet for "Oh! Susanna"

Note that having students complete a Gap Fill using word cards spread haphazardly upon a table often proves to be too difficult. By organizing the words in a grid like the one in Figure 7, students have a better chance of successful task completion.

Activity 7: Pair Watching

This activity was passed on to me by colleagues many years ago, and I have subsequently modified it with the variation described here. To date, I have been unable to find the original published source, if one exists. The activity can be used to elicit and practice a range of discourse types—procedural, descriptive, narrative—and is an effective way of laying the foundations for a writing activity by providing content and establishing key vocabulary.

Level: High Beginner to Advanced

Preparation: Find a music video that tells a good visual story. Videos with a lot of interesting action work best. If you can't find a suitable music video, short video clips like *Mr. Bean* are also effective. Clips should be 2 to 5 minutes long.

Procedure:

- Divide students (A and B) into pairs.
- Seat students in two rows, facing each other; Partner A has his or her back to the screen.
- Have Partner B watch 15–20 seconds of the video.
- Press pause, and have Partner B describe what he or she saw to Partner A.
- Switch and repeat until the video is finished.

Follow-up activity: In pairs, students complete a Gap Fill using vocabulary from the clip they have seen and the verbs they should have used to tell the story.

Variation and extension: Before students watch the video, they are given a grid with 20 to 25 of the key words that describe the scenes in the video. Partner A watches the first scene and circles the words that correspond to what he or she sees. Then Partner A relates the story to Partner B, who circles the words he or she hears. Ask the students questions to recap and summarize the first scene that has been shown. Once the scene has been described, elicit from students the words they have circled. Tell the students to put a number 1 beside all their circled words. Then the partners switch seats, and the procedure is repeated with the second scene. This time, students put a number 2 beside the words they have cir-

imagine 3	(hero) 4	curtain 1	signs 1	mirror 2
ball gown 5	football game 4	bleachers 4	prom 5	flip 4
glasses 1	smile 2	tuxedo 5	hairbrush 2	touchdown 4
sports car 3	(kiss 3, 5	bench 3	band 4	phone 1
cheerleader 4	outfits 2	argument 2	study 5	singing 2

Figure 9. Pair Watching grid for "You Belong with Me"

Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3	Paragraph 4	Paragraph 5
glasses curtain signs phone	mirror smile hairbrush outfits argument singing	imagine sports car kiss bench	hero football game bleachers flip touchdown band cheerleader	ball gown prom tuxedo kiss study

Figure 10. Pair Watching chart for "You Belong with Me"

cled. By the end of the video clip, the grid will contain words describing five scenes and look something like the sample grid in Figure 9 for "You Belong with Me."

Individually or in pairs, students can then use their grid as a road map for writing a summary of the entire video clip. Words marked "1" will be used in the first paragraph, words marked "2" will be used in the second paragraph, and so on. To make sure students use all the words, have them put an "X" by the word after they use it in a sentence. There will of course be overlap, as some of the key vocabulary words will appear in more than one scene. To organize the summary, students can sort words into columns before they write, as in the chart in Figure 10.

Play the clip again if need be. Usually if students are writing in pairs, I have each student write about the part he or she watched. If students are writing individually, I play the clip again so students can watch the full story from start to finish before they write.

Conclusion

There are many creative and dynamic ways to adapt music and song for the classroom, and these ideas barely scratch the surface. If you have lingering doubts about the educational validity of using songs with your students, consider this quote from Jeremy Harmer (2001):

Music is a powerful stimulus for student engagement precisely because it speaks directly to our emotions while still allowing us to use our brains to analyze it and its effects if we so wish. A piece of music can change the atmosphere in a classroom or prepare students for a new activity. It can amuse and entertain, and it can make a satisfactory connection

between the world of leisure and the world of learning. (242)

Teachers can strengthen that connection by using creative activities that make listening to songs both entertaining and educational for English language learners.

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